



CUTTING WATERMELON:

Lessons in Instructional Coaching

*At picnics, you
cut watermelon.
In classrooms,
you meet teachers
where they are.*

Martha Sandstead

When we teachers are in our own classrooms, we can be whoever we want to be. We can be dictators, mother or father figures, coaches, friends, experts, guides, or mentors. We invent ourselves as we envision and build the environment we want for our students. The possibilities are endless. Teachers are powerful. Perhaps that's why it's so difficult to let other adults into this world we've so carefully constructed. We're unsure of their role and how they will fit in.


When I began working as an instructional coach three years ago, other coaches often asked me how I was able

to gain acceptance in classrooms. The answer is simple. I cut watermelon.

The idea of cutting watermelon as a metaphor for coaching came to me when I read an interview with Lawrence Guyot about grassroots organizing for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the civil rights era. Guyot urged,

You don't alter the basic format that you walk into. Let's say you're riding past a picnic, and people are cuttin' watermelons. You don't immediately go and say, "stop the watermelon cutting" and let's talk. . . . You cut some watermelons, or you help somebody else serve 'em. (p. 240)¹

I now think of "cutting watermelon" as a way to begin relationships with teachers and work with them



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to discover their potential and bring about change in a way that respects them as professionals and as people. Being a coach is not about being the expert who knows it all; it's about immersing yourself in teachers' classrooms so you can learn about the world they have created and who they are as professionals. It's about getting teachers to think deeply about where they are as teachers and providing support and encouragement to nudge them forward.

Setting the Table

Six weeks into the school year, I wanted to honor teachers' hard work. On Fridays, one teacher typically made a pot of coffee and invited colleagues to stop by in the morning to fill up and chat. Remembering Guyot's words, "don't alter the basic format that you walk into," instead of trying to host my own celebration, I offered to bring treats. I baked cookies and muffins and set out a tablecloth with flowers and food. When teachers arrived, they commented on the tablecloth.

Lawrence Guyot knew that he needed to be a member of the community to work for change. He knew to start at the picnic. A coach needs time to build relationships and socialize with teachers. Doing so helps you know one another better and care for one another more. From this place of respect and camaraderie, you can begin your most important work. By setting a table and spending time with teachers, you demonstrate respect for teachers and establish a positive, pleasant, and relaxed tone for your time together.

Coaching from the Copy Room

One Wednesday when a staff meeting ended early, I discovered that the copy room provides many opportunities

to connect with teachers informally. As soon as I began making my copies, I noticed that a teacher was waiting. Knowing I didn't need my copies that day, I allowed her to go ahead of me. While she copied, we chatted about my struggles trying to corral the kindergartners during language block. The veteran teacher admitted it was difficult for her as well, but she knew that with practice they would get better.

Before she left, a 2nd grade teacher arrived. I allowed him to go ahead. I had observed in his room the day before, and he asked me what I had noticed. He said he was working hard to make sure the students were speaking for 50 percent of the time. Learning that he had set this goal for himself would help me target my future feedback for him.

A 1st grade teacher then entered before I could make a single copy. As her homework packet whirled through the machine, she asked if I could come and help her figure out how to engage some of her students, and I promised to be there the next morning.

After 45 minutes in the copy room, I still hadn't made my copies, but what I had done was much more valuable. When you encounter teachers in the hallway or the copy room, listen to them and learn about their frustrations as well as their goals. This conveys that you're willing to cut watermelon with them. These informal coaching sessions are often the most important conversations you have each week.

Taking Risks

During my first year as a coach, I was thrilled when I received my first request to model a lesson, but I was nervous to have an adult audience. As I prepared, I tried to follow the curriculum, just as the teachers are expected to do, even though I thought it included too much for kindergartners to do in 30 minutes. Rather than a swan dive,

I demonstrated a belly flop.

When I met with the teacher the following day to debrief, I joked that it wasn't much of a model but that I hoped she got something out of it. Together we discussed what went well and what we would change the next time either of us tried to teach a similar lesson. I offered to return to try again, and the lesson went well the second time around.

Model lessons are valuable coaching tools even if they don't go well. It's powerful for teachers to watch you fail, reflect, and reteach successfully. And it's essential to maintain humility, honesty, and sincerity when working with teachers. They need to know that you too struggle to make the curriculum fit the students, that you understand the time involved in preparing lessons, that you value the support of colleagues, and that you are willing to take risks.

Finding the Key

Through coaching discussions and reflections on classroom observation data, a first-year kindergarten teacher determined that she would like to monitor and encourage student engagement. I knew just the person to help, so I arranged for the kindergarten teacher to visit the classroom of a 1st grade teacher who's great at getting students to actively participate. After the observation, the kindergarten teacher had several ideas and tools to try in her own classroom, and I would be there to help her experiment with these new strategies.

As a coach, you don't need to have all the answers, but you should know where to look for them. Coaches are fortunate to visit so many classrooms and should always be on the lookout for outstanding practice, trying to discover teachers' brilliance and talent



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in order to share it with others. Each teacher has different strengths and needs. Your job is to help teachers recognize these—to celebrate their strengths and connect them to the keys that will release their untapped potential.

Tying Ribbons

At the culmination of their lesson to teach the prefixes *un-* and *re-*, the 1st grade team wanted students to have a small treat to celebrate. To get their treat, students would have to ask a classmate to *untie* a ribbon, *unzip* a plastic bag, *unwrap* the package,

unroll the Fruit Roll-Up, and *reuse* or *recycle* the materials when finished.

This was a great concrete way to get students using the prefixes in context, but it was time-consuming to prepare. Rather than lose momentum, I spent my lunch hour placing the Fruit Roll-Ups in the bags, zipping them, and tying the ribbons. Jumping in to help with mundane tasks like this lets the teachers know that no classroom or preparation task is beneath me if it will help them and their students.

This is tricky for a coach. You don't want to turn into a teaching assistant. But it's your job to knock down barriers that keep teachers from trying new ideas. You won't be available every time someone needs something laminated, copied, or cut, but doing tasks that stand in the way of teacher growth is part of your job and demonstrates to teachers that you share ownership of their students. Teachers spend countless hours preparing engaging science experiments, messy art projects, and intricate simulations to excite and motivate their students. These are acts of love for our students. It's essential to show you love the students, too.

Providing a Mirror

A 2nd grade teacher wanted to know whether she incorporated enough student talk time into her language lessons, so I collected data about what was happening during each minute of her language block. Looking at the data, she could see what was happening in her classroom, draw conclusions about her teaching practice, and set goals to move forward. The initial data indicated that students were speaking only about 17 percent of the time. She exclaimed, "It was surprising. I thought they were talking more." Six weeks later, students were

speaking 45 percent of the time; three months later, it was up to 64 percent.

Using data as a mirror, this teacher had found an area of practice she wanted to improve and worked hard to make the changes. She even posted the pie charts near her desk and told me, “Of course I put them up; they make me feel good.” She should feel good. The graphs were powerful evidence of how she had changed her professional practice and made tremendous growth.

Teachers rarely have the time or the tools to reflect on their practice. It’s your role as a coach to provide the mirror, to help teachers learn to look more closely at their reflection, and to help them find things to celebrate as well as determine their own goals for improvement. The mirror can be in the form a self-reflection or a video of a lesson. Once teachers have looked carefully in the mirror, they can determine their own goals and motivation, knowing that you will support them.

Working Together

In my eighth year of teaching, I struggled with the most difficult class of my career. I was an effective teacher with solid classroom management skills, but little of it seemed to matter with this class. I was frustrated by my inability to engage these students, but I survived that year because our school improvement coordinator worked with me extensively. She had many ideas, but rather than offer them as suggestions, she came into my class and cut watermelon. We worked alongside each other. We debriefed her efforts as well as mine until we found solutions. Working together, we both became better teachers. I’ve had similar experiences with a variety of colleagues, coaches, and teachers throughout my career. Consequently,

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I had excellent models for the kind of coach I set out to be.

All teachers want to improve, and all teachers have something to celebrate. Cutting watermelon means meeting teachers where they are and building trusting professional relationships, not having all the answers but asking

challenging questions and helping teachers work toward their goals. You discover the gifts each teacher brings to teaching, you listen and create a shared vision, and together you and the teacher you are coaching transform teacher practice one slice at a time. And instead of looking for an entry point, you find an open door. **EL**

¹Guyot, L. (1977). Inside agitator. In H. Raines (Ed.), *My soul is rested: The story of the civil rights movement in the deep south*. New York: Penguin.

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